

ENGLISH



LANDSCAPE OF THE SOUL

~Summary~

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Comparison between European and Chinese Art

This chapter is a comparative study of European and Chinese painting. It touches upon various subtleties of reality and art. Art is one of the forms of expression like poetry, music and dance. All these forms of expression have an abstract nature as they can't be defined and have to be felt or experienced. The chapter has three important areas of discussion: anecdotes related to Chinese and European painting, Daoism and how one of the philosophical doctrines of Daoism called 'Shanshui' is reflected in Chinese paintings.

Anecdote about Chinese Painter Wu Daozi

The eighth century Chinese Emperor Xuanzong commissioned a painter named Wu Daozi to paint a landscape. When the painting was ready, the Emperor was invited to appreciate it. He enjoyed looking at the forests, high mountains, waterfalls, clouds, men on hilly paths, birds in flight etc depicted in the painting. But the painter was not satisfied and he invited the attention of the Emperor towards a cave in the painting, inside which, the painter said, resided a spirit. The painter clapped his hands, causing the entrance to the cave. Then the painter said, "The inside is splendid, beyond anything words can convey. Please let me show your Majesty the way". The painter entered the cave and disappeared. The cave door closed and the painting disappeared from the wall before the Emperor could move.

Anecdote about European Painter Quinten Metsys

A fifteenth century Belgian blacksmith named Quinten Metsys fell in love with a painter's daughter. Knowing that her father would not accept him because of his profession, he secretly entered the painter's studio and painted such a realistic fly on the artist's panel that the master tried to swat it before he realised that it was not real! Quinten was accepted by the master as an apprentice, married his beloved and soon became famous for his 'realism' in painting.

Meaning of the Tales

Such stories as that about Wu Daozi are very common in China's classical education. It was through such stories that great masters made abstract concepts concrete. Such tales reveal that art has an inner life, meaning or soul. Only when one is able to see that inner life can one

understand its true meaning. The Emperor had appreciated the painting only from what he saw. He could only see the body of the painting, whereas the painter tried to show him the soul, the inner life and meaning of the painting. Similarly, Quinten Metsys signified illusionistic likeness in European painting.

The same holds good for the story about the frightening likeness of a dragon to a real one which prevented a Chinese painter from drawing its eye, as he felt that then the dragon would see him and attack him.

Basis of Chinese Paintings

Chinese paintings are based on the philosophy of Daoism. Dao means "path or way" - the way into the mystery of the universe. The Emperor may rule over territories, but the artist alone knows the way within. Life has no meaning unless we undertake the inner, spiritual journey. When Wu Daozi said, "let me show you the way", he meant the way to the inner meaning of art or mystery of the universe. This is the spirit of Chinese paintings. They do not reproduce an actual view, but use a real landscape to say something more. A Chinese painter, therefore, wants the viewer to take plural view points to enter into his painting and travel in it. He wants our active participation, not only physical but also mental. His landscape is not a copy of a real landscape; it is a representation of an inner reality, a spiritual and conceptual space.

What Daoism Is?

According to Daoism, this universe is composed of two complementary poles, viz. Yin (feminine) and Yang (masculine). The interaction of these two energies makes the universe. Their meeting point, called the "Middle Void" also holds great significance, though it is often overlooked. This can be compared with the yogic practice of pranayama; breathe in, retain, breathe out the retain' part is the "Middle Void" where meditation occurs. This void is essential - nothing can happen without it.

In Daoism, a landscape is called "Shanshui" (Shan = mountain, Shui = water); however, it doesn't represent a real landscape; it is the Daoist view of the universe. To understand Chinese paintings, one must understand Daoism. So, the mountains and water in the Chinese paintings are representative of Shanshui and the unpainted space is representative of the Middle Void where the interaction between Yin and Yang takes place. Man is the medium of communication between the two complementary poles of the universe and you can see his presence too in the Chinese paintings.

Conclusion of Landscape to Soul

To sum up, in Landscape to Soul summary, we learn that art is an infinite form that has a rich history and it cannot fit inside any certain box or label, it has a life of its own.